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MUSIC AND DRAMA

SIGNIFICANT HAPPENINGS OF THE MONTH

Charpentier's New Opera, "Julien," at the Metropolitan—Some Outstanding Characteristics of a Singular Work.

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

RANDOM generalizations concerning art are treacherous and full of peril; yet we shall venture this (which we shall put, discreetly, in an interrogative form): Why is it that music, of all arts the one that is pre-eminently fitted to utter the unutterable, the art which is beyond all others the tongue of the inward life—why is it that this great and subtle and incomparably eloquent art is so often ineffectual, so often an awkward stammerer, when it strives to discourse of what poets and rhetoricians like to speak of as "The Ideal"? Of all the symphonic poems of Liszt, the weakest of that horizon-making series is "Die Ideale." How tedious is the long address of Hans Sachs in the last act of "Die Meistersinger" in which the cobbler-poet, whose speech elsewhere is golden, harangues the populace concerning the ideal uses of art! How commonplace is the melody which Beethoven has invented to set forth the sublime conception underlying the final movement of the Choral Symphony!—a melody which should have been nobly ecstatic, of a high and august beauty, but which yields, instead, only an impression of smug and bourgeois piety, as cheerfully banal and unexalted as any of the lesser inspirations of the hymn-book. And how suddenly the eloquence of Richard Strauss ceases and determines when, in the concluding section of his "Tod und Verklärung," he would denote the soul's attainment of its ideal! It may be reported that Herr Strauss, being wickedly intent upon making a living out of his art—a most reprehensible purpose on the part of a composer, though

poets and painters and novelists and sculptors and architects may pursue it without accusation of turpitude—could naturally not be expected to succeed in dealing with *The Ideal* as an expressional motive. But that does not precisely fit Beethoven's case, or Liszt's, or Wagner's. The inquisitive music-lover will not find it difficult to extend our inquiry, which we cannot here pursue further; we have suggested it merely as a preface to a few remarks concerning a current and conspicuous example of the thing we have been speaking of—namely, M. Gustave Charpentier and his "poème lyrique" (as he calls it), "*Julien*."

"*Julien*," which the Metropolitan Opera House has just added to its repertoire, has been widely talked of as a kind of sequel to "*Louise*." It is nothing of the sort. Save that the two leading characters are named Julien and Louise, and that they are lovers, and that Julien is a poet, this opera is no more a sequel to "*Louise*" than it is a sequel to "*Les Huguenots*." It is really an elaboration of an earlier work of Charpentier's, a "symphony-drama" called "*La Vie du Poète*," a title which is identical with the sub-title of "*Julien*." The score of this earlier work is not accessible; but it is said that in concocting "*Julien*" Charpentier has helped himself liberally to the music of "*La Vie du Poète*," and that the "symphony-drama" of 1892 constitutes more than one-half of the "poème lyrique" of 1913.

In "*Julien*," Charpentier is again his own librettist, as he was in "*Louise*." It is not easy to see how the admirable dramatist of "*Louise*" can have supposed that the rambling, confused, inchoate allegory which he has contrived for "*Julien*" was fit matter for the stage. We are free to confess that we do not know what it is all about. Charpentier tells us that he has tried to show us "an artist passionately taken with an ideal, and continually in collision with the realities of existence." A great theme, indisputably; and if Charpentier had translated it into terms of the drama we might have had from him a powerful and moving work. But "*Julien*" is void of drama.

Julien, a poet, dreams a dream. In this dream we see him worshiping in the Temple of Beauty, with Louise at his side; repulsing a lovable Slovak peasant-girl who offers to assuage his dejection; ministered to by his grandmother, and cursing God on a storm-tossed seacoast in Brittany;

carousing in a Montmartre carnival, consorting with a drunken prostitute, and finally dying at her feet.

That is all that emerges to the sense of the casual observer. To learn more, one must study carefully the printed text of the libretto; and here again one is baffled, for the text itself requires interpretation. There is much talk of *The Ideal*, of the poet's dedication to it, of his falling away from it, of his frustration. In sum, the drama (though it is absurd to call it that) exhibits to us the progressive deterioration of an artist who has consecrated himself to the worship of *The Ideal* and to the uplifting of humanity through its application. His downward course is shown through various stages of decline—from "Enthusiasm" (Charpentier has characterized each of the four acts of his libretto), through "Doubt" and "Impotence," to final "Intoxication." Just why he deteriorates in this deplorable manner is not made clear—least of all by the allegorist himself. Some say that it is because of *Pride* and *Reason*; others say that it is because of "sensuality."

Three scenes of this piece, Charpentier tells us, are dream pictures, and five are supposed to represent actual occurrences. "The only real difference between one kind and the other is found in the proportion in which the real and the marvelous have been mixed. Thus have I tried to set forth, just as I did in the second act of '*Louise*,' what our daily life presents incessantly in the way of mysterious suggestions, of strange surprises, of peculiar forebodings. Save in the prologue, entitled '*Louise*,' the various figures surrounding Julien are external manifestations of his state of mind rather than real, living beings. Some of them are nothing more than reflections, vitalized for the moment, of an aspiration, a regret, a weakness, a recollection. Others assume more lifelike form, moving and acting, as it were, according to human laws. But the spectator has seen them taking shape in the imagination of the protagonist—the one hero of the drama, to be quite literal—and he will grasp the fact easily that in reality they dominate, after the manner of superior instincts, a plot to which they apparently submit—a plot which is nothing more nor less than a symbolical exposition of the story of the inner life."

But this does not help us in the least. It is almost impossible to distinguish the allegorical from the real, the "dream-pictures" from the "actual occurrences," so obscure are

Charpentier's intentions; so that the hearer and spectator is left dangling helplessly in the air between the Temple of Beauty and the coast of Brittany, not knowing whether he is to be caught up into a dreamer's paradise or dropped upon an actual firmament.

There is far too much of vague and flaccid fantasy in this curious concoction of Charpentier's, too much that is aimless, incoherent, vacuously rhapsodic. Witnessing it, one echoes that supplication of him who was both poet and thinker: "More brain, O Lord, more brain!" Charpentier never comes to grips with his subject—for we do not, of course, dispute the dignity and importance of his theme. He approaches it as a sentimentalist and rhetorician, not as a tragic comedian; and one remembers uneasily what Matthew Arnold said long ago of the incapacity of the French genius for "seriousness in the higher sense, for what Virgil called *virtus verusque labor*." This is not surprising. What is surprising is the absence in Charpentier of the familiarly extolled French "clarity," the French "logic," the French "precision."

A greater composer than Charpentier might have redeemed this murky and futile allegory by music of transfiguring passion, of uplifting beauty. But Charpentier has been unequal to such an achievement. He was never more than a second-rate music-maker, at best; and who shall say that he was not, in this case, handicapped by that strange blight which, as we noted at the start, falls, seemingly, upon so many of those composers who would discourse in tones of Idealism and The Ideal? Yet there is much in his libretto which might have stirred noble and ecstatic music in a master of inspired utterance. The composer of "Parsifal" might have made the temple of Beauty resound with (in Swinburne's magnificent phrase) "the sound of swords and harps in heaven."

The production of the work at the Metropolitan is remarkable for splendor of setting, for general adequacy and fitness. It would be excessively generous to say that Mr. Caruso is happily cast as the self-torturing, Hamlet-like Julien. It is a rôle from which Jean de Reszke might have evolved an unforgettable creation; but the character lies beyond the range of Mr. Caruso's expressional ability—he was not cut out by Nature for rôles of this type. Yet he puts much sincerity into it, he releases much emotional energy,

and he sings the music very beautifully. Miss Farrar's assumption of her widely dissimilar quintet of rôles—Louise, Beauty, the Young Girl, the Grandmother, the Grisette—is an astonishing *tour de force*. She characterizes each part sharply and vividly, with rare histrionic skill; and as the Young Girl of the second act, whom she discloses as an apparition of enamoring sweetness, she is delightful beyond measure; Miss Farrar has never done anything so reposeful, so finely restrained, so hauntingly lovely, as this exquisite impersonation. Though there are more than a score of other characters in the piece, they count, individually, for very little; Mr. Caruso and Miss Farrar sustain most of the interpretative burden—saving the chorus, which plays a large and significant part in developing Charpentier's conception.

When all is said, we are far from being insensible to a certain pathos that is implicit in this elaborate and disappointing work—the pathos that envelopes all those who love with passion beautiful things; who try to speak, however haltingly, however brokenly, of those mysteries which are beyond speech; who are dreamers of dreams; who have seen, and cannot forget; yet who are not without consolation: for they know that “there will come a time when it shall be light, and man shall awaken from his lofty dreams, and find his dreams still there, and that nothing has gone save his sleep.”

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